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Eight birds new to DPR Korea

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Between July 2000 and March 2004, during frequent recreational birding in Pyongyang (c.39°05'N 125°45'E), the capital city of the Democratic People's Republic of (DPR) Korea, I found six bird taxa apparently new to the country, with a seventh at Hyangsan (c.40°05'N 126°10'E). Tomek (1999–2002) reviewed almost all bird records available from DPR Korea; the chief omission was the so-far unpublished collection of about 1,200 bird skins by Sten Bergman during 1935–1936. P. Ericson (*in litt.* 2003) has kindly provided details of this collection. Additionally, past records of one further species not generally included within the avifauna of DPR Korea are presented here. Except where noted, birds were observed with x8 or x10 binoculars and, where appropriate, a x15–45 zoom telescope.

COMMON TEAL *Anas crecca carolinensis*

On 18 January 2003, a male 'Green-winged Teal' was observed in a flock of approximately 270 Common Teals, all other males (c.50% of flock) being *A. c. crecca*. The *A. c. carolinensis* appeared largely as *A. c. crecca*, but was readily identified by its vertical white bar on the breast-side, falling within the grey area. The head looked plainer than in *A. c. crecca*, through the apparent absence of yellow lines between the orange and metallic green patches. The bird lacked male *A. c. crecca*'s horizontal white line along the wing; however,

this patch is often concealed in *A. c. crecca*. It was observed on the Taedong river by the east shore of Rungra islet, at 110–140 m range for 30 minutes in excellent mid-morning light. It was seen again, under generally similar conditions, on 21, 25, 28 and 31 January 2003. I was then absent until mid-March. By then, teal numbers on this stretch of river had dropped to 100–150, and the *A. c. carolinensis* could not be found. It, or another similar bird, was seen well in the same stretch of river on 29 February 2004; the only date this flock was checked carefully between 28 November 2003 and 13 March 2004. On 28 January 2003, it was filmed, in rather harsh light, by the Korean Central Broadcasting Committee, for broadcast on national television.

This race, nowadays considered by some authorities as a separate species (e.g. Sangster *et al.* 2001), is a vagrant to the south of Korea (Won 1996, Lee *et al.* 2000). It could well be commoner: females cannot easily be identified in the field, and even males may be overlooked in distant teal flocks. It is the second commonest Nearctic duck to cross the Atlantic, hundreds having been recorded in the British Isles alone (Lewington *et al.* 1991). Occurrence at the same site in successive winters, presumed to indicate returning by the same individual birds, is not infrequent in Britain (Fraser *et al.* 1999).

WHISKERED TERN *Chlidonias hybridus*

On 3 June 2003, a breeding-plumaged Whiskered Tern flew up the Chongchon River at Hyangsan, and a few minutes later flew back downstream, both times at a leisurely pace. The bird was c.30 m above the water on the first pass, and c.60 m above on the second. Although I did not have binoculars, the viewing conditions were excellent: the light was clear (the bird was found at 08h20) and from behind, and the bird was against a hill-side background and passed within 30–50 m of me. The bird was evidently the size of a small tern, and the airy, somewhat erratic flight was typical of a marsh tern. As the bird came closer, my momentary first thought was of the tropical Asian Black-bellied Tern *Sterna acuticauda* (wholly unlikely to occur in Korea) because of the darkness of the underparts. These contrasted with silvery upperwing and white (or whitish) underwing. These features were re-checked on the second pass, when the lack of tail streamers was also noted. White-winged Tern *C. leucopterus* is a potential confusion species, but any individual that had moulted into a dark belly would also show dark underwing-coverts. The only conceivable identification risk in the range would be Common Tern *Sterna hirundo* of the race *S. h. longipennis*. This race has significantly darker underparts than European populations, but I have not seen a bird anywhere near approaching a Whiskered Tern in darkness.

This species seems to have formerly been genuinely rare in Korea, with only a few records from the southern provinces (Lee *et al.* 2000). Now it is increasingly recorded in the south, mainly between May and September. In 2003, birds were recorded from at least four locations (N. Moores *in litt.* 2003).

FLESH-FOOTED SHEARWATER *Puffinus carneipes*

There are ten ringing recoveries from the seas of DPR Korea of Flesh-footed Shearwaters ringed in Lord Howe Island, New South Wales, Australia, between 1959 and 1964 (D. Drynan *in litt.* 2004). Recovery sites are 64 km off Wonsan (39°07'N 128°00'E), undated, and on 20 June 1963 (two birds); Tongjason Gulf (39°10'N 128°00'E) on 12 June 1967 (two birds), 18 June 1967 (two birds) and 8 August 1967; Tan Chun Sea (40°27'N 129°00'E) on 2 September 1968 (see also Purchase 1970); and Hamgyong Namdo Province (40°00'N 128°00'E) on 3 July 1966. On the basis of overall distribution of recoveries, and extending from McKean and Hindwood (1965), Purchase (1971) showed that the East Sea of Korea (north to the Russian coast) was an important part of the species's (austral) winter range. Flesh-footed Shearwater was not listed for DPR Korea by Tomek (1999–2002) who did, however, list the somewhat similar-looking Short-tailed Shearwater *P. tenuirostris*, on the basis of Rim Chun-Hun (1963). This source documented a flock of birds identified as *P. tenuirostris* 65 km off Wonsan on 20 Jun 1963, and mentioned that two birds caught were bearing rings. The coincidence of date, precise location, the presence of two marked birds and that neither species had previously been recorded in the country (and thus would not have been represented in collections accessible to Rim Chun-Hun) suggests that these are the same birds as the Flesh-footed Shearwaters recovered from Wonsan. There is thus no

published evidence for Short-tailed Shearwater occurring in DPR Korea, although it seems likely to visit, at least occasionally: there is a ringing recovery of an Australian bird from southern Korea (36°00'N 129°40'E, on 12 Jul 1966) (D. Drynan *in litt.* 2004) and it is seasonally abundant off Japan (Brazil 1991).

EURASIAN BLACKBIRD *Turdus merula*

Eurasian Blackbird was recorded in Pyongyang every year of observation. There were records on: 2 December 2000 (two together), 2, 14 and 21 January, 1 December 2001, 23 February 2002, 21, 27 (two birds) and 28 September, 25 October, 1, 12, 18 and 22 November 2003 (singles, except where stated, in Moranbong Park), 23 November 2001 and (unconfirmed) 14 July 2003 (single on Rungra islet), 10 September 2002 (single in Munsubong Park), 24 and 27 September 2002 (single in the Diplomatic Compound), 30 September 2002 (single over the Taedong river), and 25 February 2004 (two together by the Taedong river, near Kim Il Sung square). Additionally, a singing male was at Hyangsan on 8 May 2003. Birds were sometimes seen very well, down to 8 m in excellent light, and were identifiable as large thrushes with uniform dull and dark plumage, not strictly black but dark slaty. Birds frequently called (and were usually found aurally). The most common call was a distinctive, loud and far-carrying, somewhat wistful-sounding *huyinh* note. This taxon, presumably *T. m. mandarinus* (see Clement and Hathway 2000), neither looks, sounds, nor behaves particularly like *T. m. merula* of western Europe (e.g. David-Beaulieu 1944), but I am very familiar with it from Laos (e.g. Duckworth *et al.* 1998). The observation on 23 November 2001 was shared with R. J. Tizard, who has also seen the species many times in South-East Asia.

The species seems to be a regular, although scarce, visitor to Pyongyang, with no clear seasonal pattern yet apparent (recorded in January, May, July [unconfirmed] and October in one year; and in February, September, November, December in two years). Occurrence is erratic, e.g. Moranbong Park (which provided most observations) was visited approximately weekly for three and a half years, including throughout October 2002 to January 2003 (months with records in other years), but no blackbirds were found other than those listed above. Similarly, although not listed for Korea by Won (1996), it has recently been recorded annually in southern Korea since the first record in the late 1990s. Records are predominantly in spring, but include breeding and mid-winter (Lee *et al.* 2000, N. Moores *in litt.* 2004). The species seems to be expanding its range in north-east Asia. Although Clement and Hathway (2000) list only one record from Japan, the species now occurs regularly (N. Moores *in litt.* 2004); and in and around Beidaihe (north-east China) it has increased from less than annual in the 1990s to four records in spring 2003 alone (J. Hornskov *in litt.* 2004).

DARK-THROATED THRUSH *Turdus ruficollis*

On 11 April 2003, a 'Red-throated Thrush' *T. r. ruficollis* landed in the top of a leafless small *Robinia* sp. tree at 25 m range and perched, calling, for about five minutes. It was accompanied by a 'Naumann's' Dusky Thrush *Turdus naumanni naumanni*. The Dark-

throated Thrush was immediately distinctive: it was approximately 20% bulkier than the Dusky Thrush, and very different in plumage. It showed rather uniform, cold-toned grey-brown upperparts, slightly paler on the folded tertials. The throat and upper breast were solid dark, cold-toned red, with no dark or pale markings (e.g. fringes, malars) visible within. The red patch had a sharp U-shaped border with the remainder of the underparts, which were off-white. Precise details of the head pattern could not be seen because the head was against the sky. There were certainly no contrasting pale areas, but the supercilium seemed to be coloured as the throat. The calls sounded indistinguishable from those of Dusky Thrush, being mainly loud abrupt *chack* notes. The tail was strongly patterned, most of the rectrices being bright deep red, but at least the central pair being cold-toned ash grey-brown. The tip seemed darker. The observation was shared with, and the bird tape-recorded by, Kim Chol and Jo Song Ryong, two trainee bird surveyors of subsidiary bodies within the DPRK Ministry of Land and Environment Protection.

The species is considered a vagrant in southern Korea (Won 1996, Lee *et al.* 2000), but is probably too frequent to merit this status: several 'Red-throated Thrushes' occurred there during winter 2002–2003 alone. Most records are during late October to early November, and again in March and April. 'Black-throated Thrush' *T. r. atrogularis* has also been recorded in southern Korea, but is less frequent than the nominate race (N. Moores *in litt.* 2003, A. M. Stoddart *in litt.* 2003). The species may have been overlooked previously in DPR Korea: during migration periods (particularly autumn), flocks of Dusky Thrushes hundreds-strong pass through Pyongyang. It is rarely practicable to check even a quarter of birds present, and I would not have detected this species aurally.

RED-BILLED STARLING *Sturnus sericeus*

On 12 August 2001, at 05h45 an adult Red-billed Starling appeared among the hundreds of post-roost White-cheeked Starlings *Sturnus cineraceus* in the grounds of the British Embassy. It loafed in the lower canopy of a large *Platanus* tree, in mostly full view, for several minutes at 40 m range. It had a dirty-looking blond head, coral-red bill and legs, glossy black folded wings (showing extensive white on the primary coverts during preening), soft-grey upperparts with paler, almost off-white rump. The underparts were paler than the upperparts but darker than the head. In size and shape it resembled White-cheeked Starling. The observation was shared with T. D. Evans.

The species is not listed for Korea by Won (1996) or Lee *et al.* (2000), but is now found fairly frequently in southern Korea, including occasional small flocks (N. Moores *in litt.* 2004). It is also spreading in north-east China, being now recorded annually from the Beidaihe area and having bred recently in Beijing (J. Hornskov *in litt.* 2004). It could well be commoner in Pyongyang than this single record suggests. On many mornings, it is impracticable to check the embassy starling roost (which may contain over 1,000 birds), because the birds erupt in large flocks and fly straight away. Many other starling roosts are present in the city,

and these were not checked. I did not have access to any regular flock feeding areas.

COMMON CHIFFCHAFF *Phylloscopus collybita*

In the mid-morning of 9 December 2001 in Moranbong Park, I heard some loud but soft single-tone, single-note *pwee* calls from low bushes in a sheltered sun-trap. These calls immediately recalled wintering Common Chiffchaffs (presumably *P. c. abietinus* and/or *P. c. collybita*) in south-west England. They lacked any trace of the 's' sound of an otherwise somewhat similar call (*p'swee*) of Yellow-browed Warbler *P. inornatus*, an abundant migrant through Pyongyang occasionally lingering to mid-November. I eventually obtained excellent views (at 6–12 m range, at eye level, in perfect soft winter sunlight, for several minutes) of a relatively small and plain leaf warbler. Identification was based on the frequent downward tail-flicks; plain olive upperparts with a dirty-looking pale supercilium (shorter than on Dusky Warbler *P. fuscatus*) and no wing-bar; off-white underparts more sullied on throat and vent, although the boundaries were not sharp; conspicuous eye-ring, especially below the eye; and thin (even for a leaf warbler), pointed, dark bill. The underparts lacked any real yellow tone, and were cleaner and brighter than on Dusky Warbler. As with solitary wintering chiffchaffs in south-west England (personal observation), the bird tended to call frequently for short bursts, alternating with periods of silence. Several hours later, and about 500 m away, I relocated the bird, not calling, moving swiftly through low bushes along a small stream in the park, and reconfirmed all the above characters. I searched fruitlessly for the bird in the same areas on 16 December 2001. I am very familiar with the species from south-west England, where wintering birds often forage beside streams (Duckworth 1999).

At 08h00 on 15 April 2003, I heard a loud song from a *Forsythia* hedge on Rungra islet. Coincidentally, the previous evening I had been listening to *Phylloscopus* recordings on Veprincev (1987), and I immediately recognised the song of *P. c. tristis*. The song was a rather uneven, hesitant, even part-formed sounding, series of short phrases such as *weet chu weet*, *weet chu weet*, *whut chu weet-oo*, *chit choo weet choo weet*, *wee tschip*, *oo wheet chip*, *oo weet chip*, *sip sip-oo-weep*, *sip oo wheep*, *soo weep sip*... The song lasted many minutes, with only occasional pauses for a few seconds. Despite lacking the forcefulness of the less-varied song of *P. c. collybita*, it was strongly reminiscent of that bird; not infrequently it sounded as if the song ought to stop rambling, and break into a full *chiff chaff*... sequence. The bird was readily visible as it moved speedily through the partly-leaved hedge. It was visually identifiable as a chiffchaff by: the lack of wingbar; supercilium shorter than on Dusky Warbler, and nowhere clean white; generally dull, cold coloration with no yellow visible on the underparts; thin, dark, pointed bill; dark legs; and frequent downward flicking of tail. I watched it for ten minutes at 6–12 m. The bird's arrival was associated with first records that spring from Pyongyang of four congeners (Dusky Warbler, Yellow-browed Warbler, Eastern Crowned Leaf Warbler *P. coronatus* and Pallas's Leaf Warbler *P.*

proregulus). Further south in Korea, at Eocheong island off the south coast, many migrants also arrived on 15 April 2003 (N. Moores *in litt.* 2003). On my next visit to the Taedong, on 17 April 2003, none of these leaf warblers could be found.

These appear to be the only records from the Korean peninsula (see Won 1996, Lee *et al.* 2000) of a species not common in far east Asia. There are only four records from Hong Kong (Carey *et al.* 2001), and a few from Japan (N. Moores *in litt.* 2004). In winter 2001–2002, the species was also recorded for the first time in South-East Asia (two birds in far-northern Vietnam: A. Allport in Robson 2002b). The following spring one was seen at Happy Island on the Hebei Province, China, coast opposite Korea (J. Hornskov in Robson 2002b); this was the first record from that region of China, although it is a regular migrant as far east as Golmud, Qinghai (J. Hornskov *in litt.* 2003). These individuals in Pyongyang may have been genuine vagrants, as it seems unlikely that the species, if occurring regularly in the region, has been overlooked in all surrounding countries. The April bird can be safely identified as *P. c. tristis*. That in December was (on geographical grounds) presumably also that race, although notes on call and plumage are inconclusive (see Cramp 1992, Beaman and Madge 1998).

LESSER WHITETHROAT *Sylvia curruca*

In the early afternoon of 9 December 2001, I heard loud *tk* calls typical of a *Sylvia* sp. warbler coming from a sheltered patch of young conifers (mainly *Pinus* sp.) on Rungra islet. Almost immediately, a Lesser Whitethroat appeared, and obligingly remained largely in full view for several minutes, despite energetically foraging through the foliage. The bird was a mid-size warbler, with the rather big-headed appearance typical of *Sylvia* spp., exaggerated by a tendency to erect its forehead and fore-crown feathers. The upperparts were cold-toned mid-brown, lacking any trace of rufous on the wings. The head, especially the ear-coverts, was darker, although the latter were not boldly demarcated. The white throat contrasted with the sullied white breast and flanks. In jerky, hesitant flight between trees, white outer tail feathers were conspicuous. I relocated the bird, this time silent, on the islet on 16 December 2001, a few hundred yards away in a large area of *Biota orientalis* trees. Again, the bird was actively foraging in sunlight foliage. It was easily viewable for several periods within a half-hour. As well as features noted earlier, the eye was dark with a slight pale under-crescent, and there was a slight pale line between the ear-coverts and crown. I photographed it on the second date, but the bird, while recognisably a white-throated, otherwise dark-headed *Sylvia*, is out of focus. I was away from mid-December for several weeks, but searched hard for the bird several times in February 2002, without success. I am very familiar with the species in south-west England (Duckworth 1999).

With only one other Korean record (from Busan: Lee *et al.* 2000), the species may be genuinely very rare in Korea. Eastern populations, sometimes separated as *S. c. blythi* (although this race was considered synonymous with the nominate race by Shirihai *et al.* 2001), are proven long-distance vagrants, occurring in Europe in winter (Shirihai *et al.* 2001). There are only 1–2

records of Lesser Whitethroat from the Chinese coast opposite Korea (J. Hornskov *in litt.* 2002). The species tolerates very cold weather, wintering occasionally in north-east Qinghai and Ningxia, China, where temperatures cool to -20°C (J. Hornskov *in litt.* 2002), and one wintered in Hokkaido in 2002–2003 (N. Moores *in litt.* 2004). Perhaps coincidentally, the first Thai and South-East Asian record 'for some years' came two months later, on 10 February 2002 (P. Bamford and P. Saengkaew in Robson 2002a).

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Fire-breasted Flowerpecker *Dicaeum ignipectus*: the first record for Bangladesh

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On 21 December 2003 at 07h00, I observed a male Fire-breasted Flowerpecker *Dicaeum ignipectus* at Alengthong (c.21°58'N 92°35'E), Bandarban, south-east Bangladesh. The species has not been previously listed for the country and is therefore believed to be the first record (Husain 1979, Khan 1982, Thompson *et al.* 1993, Thompson and Johnson 1996, 2003, IUCN Bangladesh 2000, Cheke and Mann 2001).

The bird was seen on a medium-sized leguminous tree on a scrubby hill slope, close to a small patch of mixed-evergreen forest at c.900 m. It was observed using 7–21x40 Tasco binoculars for about one minute, until it flew away. It had the shape of a typical flowerpecker, with a short bill and tail. The upperparts looked dark, probably because of the poor light. It had a pale throat, a crescent-shaped scarlet breast patch of about 2 cm², and a buff-coloured lower breast and belly; the bill and legs were blackish. Based on these characters, the bird was identified as a male Fire-breasted Flowerpecker using Grimmett *et al.* (1998). There are six other flowerpecker species found in the region: Thick-billed Flowerpecker *Dicaeum agile*, Yellow-vented Flowerpecker *D. chrysorrheum*, Yellow-bellied Flowerpecker *D. melanoxanthum*, Orange-bellied Flowerpecker *D. trigonostigma*, Pale-billed Flowerpecker *D. erythrorynchos*, Plain Flowerpecker *D. concolor* and Scarlet-backed Flowerpecker *D. cruentatum* (Thompson and Johnson 1996). The presence of a crescent-shaped breast-patch distinguishes the Fire-breasted Flowerpecker from all these. A black belly-patch (a diagnostic feature of the male) was not noticed, and this may indicate that the bird had not acquired full adult plumage.

In the Indian subcontinent the Fire-breasted Flowerpecker occurs in the Himalayas through north-west India, Nepal, Bhutan and the north-east Indian hills where it is a resident, but subject to altitudinal movements (Grimmett *et al.* 1998). The species is commonly found at high altitudes, breeding mainly at

1,400–2,700 m and wintering from foothills up to 2,500 m (Grimmett *et al.* 1998). The hills of south-eastern Bangladesh are located less than 100 km from the known distribution of this species in Mizoram, and the bird was probably an altitudinal migrant.

Alengthong is situated close to Myanmar and the Indian state of Mizoram. This is one of the most remote, and hence least explored, areas of Bangladesh. Political disturbance and the presence of armed terrorist groups make any survey work difficult, hence there has been no long-term survey or research on the birds of this area. Only some brief explorations have been carried out, and these recorded a number of new species for Bangladesh (see Thompson and Johnson 2003). Further new records might be expected.

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